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“Life Studies”—Robert Lowell’s Comic Breakthrough*

“LIFE STUDIES” is probably one of the four most important volumes of new poetry in English since *Four Quartets*. One reason for this judgment would certainly be that Lowell had profited from the other three: *Paterson*, *The Pisan Cantos*, and *Howl and Other Poems*. But there are personal reasons for the broad success of Lowell’s book, arising out of his resilience, resourcefulness, and plain devotion to the craft of poetry. Speaking of the period just after January 1957 (when his daughter was born), Lowell said: “By the time I came to *Life Studies* I’d been writing my autobiography and also writing poems that broke meter. I’d been doing a lot of reading aloud . . . and more and more I found that I was simplifying my poems . . . to improve the reading.” Adding to this a few years later, he said: “In March [1957] . . . I was in San Francisco, the era and setting of Allen Ginsberg, and all about very modest poets were waking up prophets. I became sorely aware of how few poems I had written, and that these few had been finished at the latest three or four years earlier. Their style seemed distant, symbol-ridden and willfully difficult. . . . I felt my old poems hid what they were really about, and many times offered a stiff, humorless and even impenetrable surface. . . . I was reading what I no longer felt.” Here we have a reminder of the primitive issue posed by Socrates in the *Phaedrus* and again by Rousseau in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*: compared with the written work, there is an essentially greater personal reality in speech and the pressure it exerts on the present speaker to believe it and defend it, or else to give it up. He can no longer merely display a poem as an object among his other possessions. Evidently, Lowell found himself less believable on the platform than rival poets (like Allen Ginsberg) of more “modest” gifts.

Lowell went on to a further disclosure: “What influenced me more than San Francisco and reading aloud was that for some time I had been writ-

ing prose. I felt that the best style for poetry was none of the many poetic styles in English, but something like the prose of Chekhov or Flaubert.” But this feeling proved to be no more than partly right: “No poem, however, got finished and soon I left off and forgot the whole headache. Suddenly, in August I was struck by the sadness of writing nothing, and having nothing to write, of having, at least, no language.” It was then that Lowell began “Skunk Hour” by writing its last two stanzas. Later he wrote the two before them, but could not complete the poem until mid-September. “All was too close. . . . I began to feel that real poetry came, not from fierce confessions, but from something almost meaningless but imagined. I was haunted by the image of a blue china doorknob. I never used the doorknob, or knew what it meant, yet somehow it started the current of images in my opening stanzas. They at last gave my poem an earth to stand on, and space to breathe.” Lowell also disclosed that Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Armadillo” was one of his models—his “main source.” Both poems, he said, “use short line stanzas, start with drifting description, and end with a single animal.”¹

We have here a historical account (not necessarily “the true” account in a literary sense) of the life process of which a series of poems is the result. It is a story of professional discontent, rivalry, emulation, and wrestling within the *métier*. Of the poet’s new conversion, too, to the creative craft of William Carlos Williams (“an earth to stand on”), if not indeed of Charles Olson (“space to breathe”). And we have Lowell’s assertion that the urge to confess was subordinate to that blue doorknob in the genesis of these poems. It cannot be far wrong to say that Lowell did really undergo a kind of rebirth or redemption in 1957, largely because he suddenly became aware of the sound of his own verse and of the voices and claims made on him by the presence of his fellow poets.

Lowell also showed an extraordinary ability to

profit by the advice given him over the years by people like Frost, Eberhart, Tate, Blackmur, Jarrell, Fiedler, Bewley, and Arrowsmith. Fortunately for him, these critics agreed in estimating his strengths and weaknesses. They all said he had a great talent for the strong metrical line, the rich image, and the complex mosaic structure. Some frankly envied his hereditary grasp of the New England mingle of European and American materials. In different ways all pointed to the same shortcomings: a lack of lovingness, inability to manage narrative, ventriloquism, "monotonous violence" in prosody and in imagery, imagery that reflected a bleak Protestant temper even while alluding to the most unctuous or baroque Catholic emblems.² Lowell countered these strictures (or turned defects into virtues) in the fifteen poems of Part IV of the *Life Studies* volume by using strategies new to his work.

First, he took up in them the familiar subject matter of the American writer, his own early childhood and youth. Second, by opening his prosody to free verse, he moved like many other poets in the fifties into the camp of William Carlos Williams (whose work he had always, in fact, admired). Not so obvious, but vital to the enthusiastic reception of the volume as a whole, were two other strategies which are outstanding in the series of fifteen "Life Studies" poems and are not to be found in such concentrated form elsewhere in Lowell's writing to date. They serve to set these poems off as a distinct work. First, "Life Studies" (as I shall continue to refer to the fifteen poems) is not a connected narrative, but it has a very strong mythic structure: a combination of the two Freudian myths of maturation and the family romance. The reason no one has pointed out these schemata, I suppose, is that both myths have been so widely internalized by now that we take them for granted.³ What I call the Freudian maturation myth might at first seem, indeed, only a behavioral platitude. But Freud's insistence upon genital adulthood and social responsibility, adopted by Lowell in "Life Studies," is a quite particular model for the life scheme and self-valuation of many people today; in this sense it is a myth. And finally, as if in answer to those who charged him with dour rigidity of feeling, Lowell adopted a comic strategy for "Life Studies," pitching it in the seriocomic (at times almost black) vein that has so widely supplanted the tragic in recent writing.

This comic quality has hardly been commented upon, though I believe many readers have noticed it. Granted it is a foolish task to try to prove these poems are amusing, yet the comic character of the work deserves commentary as a fruitful way of seeing "Life Studies" as a whole. Adopting a comic tone was a considerable departure for Lowell, especially after *The Mills of the Knavenahs*. In the title poem of that volume William Carlos Williams had found "an unwonted sense of tragedy coupled with a formal fixation of the line" (London and Boyers, p. 36). And if Norman Mailer is anywhere near the mark in his portrait of Lowell in *The Armies of the Night*, comedy is even less his wont than tragedy. So the comic vein of "Life Studies" is wry, not ebullient. Were it not true in this way to Lowell's mind and experience, the series of poems could hardly have been so successful. Just as characteristic, I should say, is the fact that Lowell's comic vein is rhetorically well supported, on a theory of the comic that, again, owes much to Freud. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* is a better book, even, than Bergson's *Laughter*; to me this means it is the best book ever written on its subject. Freud recognized the profound value of laughter in maintaining one's open response to life's pressures, whereas Bergson claimed to see in laughter only one more weapon of society against the inflexible. To Freud, a certain kind of laughter is the final proof of adulthood: when we can react to a punishing or humiliating situation with a laugh instead of a moan of despair, we are saying, "I am too grown-up to allow this to distress me!" Laughter of adulthood is an assertion of superiority and at the same time a healthy release of otherwise destructive pressure.

Lowell's use of the secular Freudian myths succeeded where he had formerly achieved but limited results with "plots" drawn from Christian salvation dogma or dream-ridden psychodrama. In "Life Studies" his version of the family romance centers in the maturation story of Robert, Junior. The odds are against his achieving adulthood, for his mother has been so overpowered by her own "Freudian papá" that she inevitably sets about castrating her weak husband, Robert, Senior. The son has no proper father figure to model himself upon; but he unconsciously falls into two relationships, both comic, that save his virility even while they dangerously imperil his maturation.

tion. First, he and his Grandfather Winslow pair up; later, Robert carries on an intrigue with his mother so as (symbolically, in the Freudian sense) to cuckold his father. At last, both parents die; Robert is the victim of psychic crises, but “Life Studies” ends on a firm, and comic, note of resolution and redemption. He, too, is now a parent, his wife no castrater but on the contrary a redeemer, an Alcestis; he finally comes to share the primitive, vital instinct for self-survival and self-perpetuation found in the maternal animal. Because his own life is vitally related to his child’s, it has a value grounded in the continuity of all life.

There is an exact congruence between this “plot” and the basic Freudian theme and variations involving the individual’s struggle to become a mature adult in the setting of his family and society. It is confirmed in detail by the prose autobiography, “91 Revere Street,” in which Lowell tells the story of his life from beginning school to early adolescence. The result is, therefore, anything but a confessional piece in the crude sense of an unguarded outpouring of anguish and guilt. On the contrary, “Life Studies,” like the works of St. Augustine and Rousseau, is the effort of a skilled rhetorician to persuade his audience that he has in fact survived his trial. What Lowell told an interviewer about *The Pisan Cantos* applies also to “Life Studies”: “You could make quite a good case for Pound’s good humor about his imprisonment, his absence of self-pity, his observant eye, his memories of literary friends, for all kinds of generous qualities and lyrical qualities that anyone would think were good” (London and Boyers, p. 276). This is the case Lowell made for himself throughout the *Life Studies* volume, and it helps to link the poems of Parts I and III (sharply observed personal experiences, reminiscences of fellow writers) to the more structured autobiography of Parts II and IV.⁴

Its Freudian plot distinguishes the “Life Studies” series in a particular way from other Lowell poems, earlier and later, dealing with himself or his family.⁵ The opening “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” is a program poem for the fifteen in the series as a whole. It presents all but two of the important persons mentioned in the following poems (Lowell’s wife and their daughter do not appear), and it fulfills the function of showing us the threat hanging over young Robert from old Grandfather Winslow and his ménage. Grandfather’s summer place is called

Char-de-sa in the Social Register, after Charlotte, Devereux, and Sarah, and (as I shall show) one is subtly made to feel that these children are as much his property as the farm, where

Like my Grandfather, the décor
was manly, comfortable,
overbearing, disproportioned.⁶

Charlotte Winslow, the poet’s mother, and his father are rejected by Young Bob in the very first line of this poem. “I won’t go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa!” expresses both his urge for freedom and the threat of domination he is under. The older poet, whose voice intrudes throughout as commentator, immediately suggests the cause: his parents’ life-style was dull and unenterprising. The next three lines mockingly characterize their escapist wishfulness: “That’s how I threw cold water / on my Mother and Father’s / watery martini pipe dreams at Sunday dinner.” “Watery martini pipe dreams,” an effective symbol for his father’s inadequacy, is essentially comic; it shows us a new Lowell. The forty-year-old poet is laughing at his father and mother, though (as the rest of the series will tell us) he knows their influence is a limitation he can never fully overcome. He goes on to laugh next at his father surrogate, Grandpa Winslow, through *his* surrogates, which are objects making up the “disproportioned” decor of the farmhouse at Char-de-sa. First is the “Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock” which “clumped” its “Tockytock, tockytock.” With a comic foreboding appropriate to Grandfather and his power to dominate, the clock is “slung with strangled, wooden game” (this decoration is conventional on most cuckoo clocks). Charlotte, Devereux, and Sarah, in Bergson’s sense of being deprived of vitality and flexibility, are wooden figures. They, too, are “Edwardian” objects, belonging to a “Victorian” parent, surviving mechanically.

This comic insight is, of course, the adult poet’s. But he invents a purely physical equivalent of intellectual vision for his five-year-old hero: the piles of cool black earth and warm lime with which he plays. Young Bob is alive and sentient, in touch with the primal elemental realities, while his elders concoct makeshifts. So Grandpa mixes beer with homemade sarsaparilla; so “the works of my Grandfather’s hands” are all fantastically hybrid in a self-canceling way:

snapshots of his *Liberty Bell* silver mine;

his high school at *Stukkert am Neckar*;
 stogie-brown beams; fool's gold nuggets;
 octagonal red tiles,
 sweaty with a secret dank, crummy with ant-stale;
 a Rocky Mountain chaise longue,
 A pastel-pale Huckleberry Finn
 fished with a broom straw in a basin
 hollowed out of a millstone.

One wonders: What has silver to do with the Liberty Bell? And isn't it Heidelberg University that's on the Neckar? Would cigars hold up a roof? Fool's gold? Ant-stale, ugh! A pastel Huck Finn? And fishing in a millstone? But Young Bob is compounding elementary black earth and white lime. Like his Rogers Peet models, he is clothed in autumnal, imperishable, Olympian perfection. Immortal, he disposes of mortality. We think ahead to the poem's last lines:

Come winter,
 Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color.

Bob, handling the elements to which all mortals return, naïve child though he is, has the primal superiority of the child. He is close to nature, close to the sources of life, and still possesses the child's singleness of experience. His mixture of earth and lime is in no way makeshift. Bob also has imagination. He can see pumpkins float, he can be a stuffed toucan. So, while Young Bob is getting his pearl gray pants dirty he is comically establishing two of the saving forces in "Life Studies": contact with reality through the child, and the power already given him by his imagination to be free, and to understand and sympathize as well.

Bob as Olympian dirty-pants occupies all of Section II of the poem. Section III of "My Last Afternoon" is reserved for "Aunt Sarah, / risen like the phoenix / from her bed of troublesome snacks and Tauchnitz classics." The clackety-clack of this line sums up aurally the musical cancellation of poor Aunt Sarah. Here there is a bit of rhetorical legerdemain on Lowell's part, for he quickly mentions and suppresses the fact that she is *Great-Aunt Sarah*, in order to fit her into the Char-de-sa pattern of childish regression—legitimately, since to Young Bob these are all equally his elders. Aunt Sarah is a pitifully hybrid and unvital figure. She reads classic English fiction, but in cheap German reprints made for tourists; her nose, Athenian, preclassic, was used (like the rest of her Dionysian charms) to repel men, not to win them. Greek nudes, appropriately, are modestly

draped where she practices for a recital in which she will never appear. Her bed is where she eats and reads—from these crumbs, what kind of phoenix-rise can there be? What kind of Easter unveiling for those shrouded gods and goddesses of plaster? Her dummy piano looks like a vanity table (Pope's Altar of Beauty), but its works are missing. It brings forth no sound, not even that of the accordion its pleats remind us of. And Aunt Sarah is mastering the part of Delilah, the original castrater! Poor Sarah, she will never make her debut. This section is a tour de force of comic degradation, in Freud's sense, and at the same time it is rhetorically rigged to show the sexually destructive power of the older generation.

Section IV, devoted to Uncle Devereux, is much longer. Its comic tone is sinister. The Freudian technique of degradation is reinforced by the two Bergsonian techniques of encrusting the living in the lifeless and immobilizing the active. Uncle Devereux was a warrior; he volunteered for Canadian service before the United States entered World War I. But the idealistic patriotism of those days is degraded by poster associations with Mr. Punch drinking Scotch, "La Belle France" on the arm of her "protector" (euphemism for the naughty word "keeper"), "the ingenu and porcine Edward VII," too long a child-prince under the eponymous Victorian mother. Degraded also by these lines, a brilliant instance of rhetorical undercutting:

The pre-war music-hall belles
 Had goose necks, glorious signatures, beauty-moles
 and coils of hair like rooster tails.
 The finest poster was two or three young men in
 khaki kilts
 being bushwhacked on the veldt—
 They were almost life-size.

The beefy and bosomy showgirls are reduced by comparison to three kinds of animals. The androgynous young soldiers, to whom something sinister is happening—impossible to say exactly what "bushwhacked" means here—never were quite life-size.⁷

Neither was Uncle Devereux. Doomed not to outlive his twenty-ninth year, he seems to have been static for a long time, even in Young Bob's eyes:

Near me was the white measuring door
 my Grandfather had pencilled with my Uncle's
 heights.

In 1911, he had stopped growing at just six feet.

Six feet, while smaller than Devereux’s shooting-cabin, is just the right size, just right, for a coffin. To Grandfather, Devereux is a child (indeed, to go on a “honeymoon” with three babies already in one’s house does seem regressive). To Bob he is “like a ginger snap man in a clothes-press.” This image, also hard to explain, can only belong to the child, not to the poet’s commentary; it expresses Young Bob’s sense of superiority over his child-adult uncle.⁸

In the next two poems, “Dunbarton” and “Grandparents,” the comic tone is gentle. Grandfather really was beloved, as Father never was. The old man’s bossiness is amusing; the boy needs it, to penetrate his “fogbound solitudes.” Of Grandmother Winslow (their names, Arthur and Mary, are not used in “Life Studies”), all we hear is that she is a rose gardener and tone deaf; she silences Aunt Sarah’s piano, and is interested in her only as a fourth for bridge.

In “Dunbarton” Grandfather has usurped Daddy’s role completely. “He was my Father. I was his son,” Lowell says, in his second, older commentator’s voice. Commander Lowell is away on sea duty, but Grandfather outranks him at that role, too; on their drives “he took the wheel himself—like an admiral at the helm.” After root beer, old man and boy perform together the male rite of “pumping ship.” But after sleep, the boy “cuddled like a paramour” in his Grandfather’s bed. Androgynous—like the kilted soldiers. “Grandparents” is set thirty-five years later, and shows Lowell the idle poet weeping over the memory of his surrogate father: “Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me!” This impotent sentimentality adds a comic touch to what we already know of Grandfather’s seductive and dominating personality. And it shows the older but still immature poet in an act of overt comic degradation—drawing a moustache on the face of the last Czar, in one of Grandpa’s old magazines. This third poem reinforces our image of Grandfather Winslow as Young Bob’s surrogate for a manly father and loving mother both; but it also shows him as a destructive representative of the old regime.

The figure of Grandfather Winslow dominates these first three “Life Studies” poems. Mrs. Charlotte Lowell, Bob’s mother, is the daughter we might expect of a parent like Grandfather Winslow, her “Freudian papá.” After eight or more years of wedded life, her voice still carries a

note of “unmarried panic.” In “Commander Lowell 1887–1950,” she drives Bob’s father out of the Navy and into Lever Brothers. Freudian phallic, Oedipal, and castration symbols abound in Lowell-as-commentator’s account of her victory:

I nagged for his dress sword with gold braid,
and cringed because Mother, new
caps on all her teeth, was born anew
at forty. With seamanlike celerity,
Father left the Navy,
and deeded Mother his property.

With “Commander Lowell” one has at first a sense that Lowell has gone too far, that the poet-son’s barbed, sarcastic wit is a form of overkill. The poem was originally written in rhymed couplets before being opened out into free verse; it still has much of the sting of neoclassical satire.⁹ Young Bob’s father is the worst hybrid of the whole portrait gallery. First he’s a seagoing engineer who can’t sail a boat, then he’s a soap salesman who can’t play golf. He can’t drink, make money, or make love like a man. A grown-up child, he never really became a man, or serious, or an adult—

And once
nineteen, the youngest ensign in his class,
he was “the old man” of a gunboat on the Yangtze.

Like Uncle Devereux, Commander Lowell peaked out at nineteen.

The sarcasm has a devastating rhetorical completeness. While Daddy booms “Anchors Aweigh” in his bathtub, Young Bob takes up his disused sword. Father, powerless to earn money by working for it, soon turns in his alienated way to the stock market. And, “while Mother dragged to bed alone,” night after night,

à la clarté déserte de sa lampe,
he slid his ivory Annapolis slide rule
across a pad of graphs—
piker speculations! In three years
he squandered sixty thousand dollars.¹⁰

The inert bone tool of the naval engineer is all the totally castrated Lowell, Senior has left to handle. One perhaps needs some cruelty to laugh at this as a masturbatory image. But satire, classical, neoclassical, or black comic, has never been gentle. Black comedy is *normally* ferocious. And, to maintain the leading theme of infantilism, the line quoted from Baudelaire’s *Le Voyage* refers to a boy in love with his maps and pictures of exotic places.¹¹

The ferocity continues in "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms." Father at sixty-three is still making efforts—all self-canceling. The odd first image, "a portly, uncomfortable boulder," seems to undercut sarcastically the last view of Commander Lowell: his "head was efficient and hairless, / his newly-dieted figure was vitally trim." Father has been removed from the Bay to be near the railroad, whose "sky-blue tracks . . . like a double-barrelled shotgun" remind us of the strange image of "Double-barrelled shotguns . . . like bundles of baby crow-bars" presented earlier when Uncle Devereux was closing up his cabin-coffin playhouse for a winter in which he would die. Other images constantly degrade Father as routinely snobbish and mean. He is a mechanical, puppetlike figure. He beams with his twenty-twenty vision, but inattentively (inattentiveness is the sin that cries out for comic vengeance in Bergson's *Laughter*). Even his death comes about in a way that suggests comic self-cancellation:

After a morning of anxious, repetitive smiling,
his last words to Mother were:
"I feel awful."

In "Father's Bedroom" the son's systematic degradation of his father appears to continue after death, in order to cancel out retrospectively the "old man's" apogee as a nineteen-year-old gunboat commander. Propping up the lamp where Father once, like Baudelaire's child, spent his solitary nights, is a volume of Lafcadio Hearn's guide to exotic Japan, much enjoyed in the days before travelogues. It was given to "Robbie from Mother." Commander Lowell's mother, whose influence seems heavy in the decor of her son's bedroom, had added these anticlimactic lines upon his return from the Far East:

This book has had hard usage
on the Yangtze River, China.
It was left under an open
porthole in a storm.

We realize that Robbie Lowell, in his Yangtze gunboat, was a kind of tourist in the Orient, whose perils were on the order of getting his things in out of the rain. And reflection leads us further. Robbie Lowell had been a mama's boy: the feminine touches (dotted curtains, kimono, plush straps, white doily shade) in his room attest to it. "Blue," repeated four times, here suggests the boy-baby who went off to Annapolis. Young Bob Lowell's father never had an independent self. This poem

is a low point of "Life Studies." Its function appears minimal, merely to offer a scarcely needed explanation, in Freudian terms, of Father's lack of manliness. But when we look at the whole structure of the series, it becomes clear that "In Father's Bedroom" prepares us for the new threat posed to Young Bob by *his* mother in the poems that follow. It also allows us to excuse his father, now that we understand him better, and, even more, to place in a more human perspective the son's savage attack on the parents. We see the immature Lowell, Junior persona as hostile and ungenerous, but under a hereditary threat. Though his whole attitude toward his father shows him to be unjust, his sardonic and cruel wit has a defensive function.

After three poems on the Grandfather and three on the Father, come three poems on the Mother. "For Sale" presents the poet's mother in the Beverly Farms cottage she "organized with prodigal animosity, / lived in just a year." Without Father as an object for her animosity she has lost the will to live:

Ready, afraid
of living alone till eighty,
Mother mooned in a window,
as if she had stayed on a train
one stop past her destination.

Freudian degradation is at work here, as usual. The final image is one of the best in "Life Studies"—vivid, familiar, ambiguous, charged with shock and meaning, it is neither tragic nor bitter. It is more comic than witty. Everyone at one time or another misses the stop. But there is also the sense that Mother's inability to take advantage of her freedom from Father is entirely consistent with her character. She's been on the same train all her life and really doesn't know how to get off.

Her death in Italy less than four years later, painful and lonely, causes Lowell to weep, as he had wept for Grandfather but never for Father. Nonetheless, the rest of "Sailing Home from Rapallo" pursues a pattern of comic degradation aimed at both parents. Mother is incongruously associated with sunny, noisy Italy in the bleak New England setting of the Winslow-Stark burying ground. Having "travelled first-class in the hold," her corpse is "wrapped like *panetone* in Italian tinfoil." Out of keeping in the "Dour and dark" enclosure, the shocking oralism of this final image is very appropriate to Mother's role in "Life

Studies.” Two puns underline the peculiar cleavage of Father and Mother from their (and the poet’s) New England ancestry. Father’s tombstone bears his family motto, *Occasionem cognosce*—it “seemed too business-like and pushing here.” (Poor Father! Why aren’t he and his wife buried in Lowell ground?) *Occasionem cognosce* means “Know your opportunity,” but it could also mean “Know your downfall,” or “Know your setting.” Father knew none of these. Far from being an opportunist, he was a man out of place everywhere. And on Mother’s coffin the Lowell name is misspelled *Lovel* suggesting an association with characters called “Lovewell” or “Loving” in erotic seventeenth-century drama. The drift of this comic incongruousness, I suspect, is to sever both Robert and Charlotte Lowell, and therefore Robert their son, not only from the “historic” line of Winslows and Starks but from the old, authentic Lowells as well.

One of the rhetorical functions of the comic in “Life Studies” is to show that the poet’s genealogical ties to the colonial past are a mixed blessing. If, as it has been said, people envy Lowell for his lineage, let them realize that the actual personal links were a considerable handicap, humanly speaking. The poet shows us the ambiguities of his family history as the rhetor might do, to capture the goodwill of a largely plebeian audience. The rhetorical advantage of the Freudian myth so insistently employed in “Life Studies” is that it works with an audience that needs only to be human.

The third of the poems dealing with Mother is “During Fever.” It begins with five lines that refer to the poet’s baby daughter, and ends by telling us that the son, a parent himself now, at last can understand and sympathize with his own parents:

Terrible that old life of decency
without unseemly intimacy
or quarrels, when the unemancipated woman
still had her Freudian papá and maids!

Although “During Fever” is the record of the youthful poet’s entrapment by his mother, it is the most consciously comic poem in “Life Studies.” The note is one of rueful complicity rather than accusation, and of self-knowledge that is born of compassion. The poet hears his baby daughter mumble “Sorry”—to her, a sound she’d picked up from hearing her father use it. (We remember from “91 Revere Street” that Lowell, Senior had

also been a mumbler.) The discovery that he, as well as his father, has much to answer for induces a humility in the commenting poet, much in contrast with the Olympian scorn found in earlier poems in the series. He sees the Freudian family romance as if it were the fabliau farce of the matron and her young lover,¹² coupling while the husband holds the door:

I used to barge home late.
Always by the bannister
my milk-tooth mug of milk
was waiting for me on a plate
of Triskets.
Often with unadulterated joy,
Mother, we bent by the fire
rehashing Father’s character—
when he thought we were asleep,
he’d tiptoe down the stairs
and chain the door.

This incestuous assignation, underlined by the little pun in “unadulterated,” is amusing enough to wipe out one’s sense that mother and son were a rather mean pair; by contrast, Father enjoys his one halfway sympathetic moment here. Of course, the oralism of the passage is appalling. Young Bob was never so infantile as this college boy has become.

The lines that follow repeat paradoxes we’re prepared for: Mother’s “master” bedroom, her hot water bottle “monogrammed like a hip-flask,” Italian china with “proper *putti*,” a nuptial bed as big as a—bathroom! Analism and oralism wittily particularized. Charlotte Winslow Lowell, she, too, stopped growing some time before adulthood:

Born ten years and yet an aeon
too early for the twenties,
Mother, you smile
as if you saw your Father
inches away yet hidden, as when he grouched behind
a screen
over a National Geographic magazine,
whenever young men came to court you
back in those settled years of World War One.

One sees from the passage the transference that made a castrator out of Charlotte Lowell. Father-dominated, she took upon herself the role of disapproving father-in-law toward her own husband. And she finds in these intimate talks with her son a surrogate for the intimacies of courtship which she was not permitted to enjoy; and also for the equal intimacies of quarreling, which she and

Commander Lowell avoided as “unseemly.” Their family life, and that of their class, had been sheltered even from the Great War.

These six poems on Father and Mother make superior black comedy, and yet they are a risky business for a poet frequently charged with lack of warmth and lovingness. Mother indeed seems fair game, but poor Father (who appears to be treated with sheer contempt) is too harmless in his foibles to merit the sarcasm that his son heaps upon him. It is at this point that “91 Revere Street” becomes particularly helpful. In it Lowell speaks of “my adolescent war on my parents.” This warfare, and Lowell’s “fogbound solitudes” of wildly imaginative reverie, along with the dangerous affection for Grandfather, were what saved the boy from being helplessly sunk in the epicene existence of his parents.

It is easy to see the usefulness of “91 Revere Street” in helping Lowell to make his parents function successfully in “Life Studies,” for it states the failure of both in specifically sexual terms. Lowell, Senior grew up as “forlornly fatherless” and “reached, perhaps, his final mental possibilities” when he graduated from Annapolis at nineteen, with bachelor tastes and a fetishistic admiration for extroverted, exaggeratedly manly types. As for Mother, she “hated the Navy” and found Father “unmasterful”—he “lacked utterly the flattering bossiness she so counted on from her father, my Grandfather Winslow.” Her sex fantasies were theatrical, Wagnerian, exploitatively shared with her young son; meanwhile, “Her marriage daily forced her to squander her subconsciously hoarded energies”—obviously her sexual energies, squandered as Father was dissipating his capital in “piker speculations.” Meanwhile, young Robert had developed asthma, for which he was being treated by a very manly chiropractor. Manliest of all was Commander Billy Harkness, his father’s friend and a legitimate hero of the sea:

I would squirm. I dared not look up because I knew that the Commander abhorred Mother’s dominion over my father, thought my asthma, supposedly brought on by the miasmal damp of Washington, a myth, and considered our final flight to Boston a scandal.

Taking hold of the table with both hands, the Commander tilted his chair backwards and gaped down at me with sorrowing Gargantuan wonder: “I know why Young Bob is an only child.”

It is a comic sad story, in which even Young Bob

is responsible. But he, whose very existence is a fluke, still has his life to live, unlike his immature parents.

“Waking in the Blue,” “Home Again after Three Months Away,” and “Memories of West Street and Lepke” are the three poems devoted to the poet himself in his calamitous postadolescence. In the first of these, set at McLean’s Hospital, Lowell makes explicit claim to having a sense of humor (“What use is my sense of humor?”). More important to us, he sees humor as aiding him in his survival as a sane human being in such hostile institutions as the hospital, the prison, and the nuclear family. “Waking in the Blue” presents the start of another day at McLean’s Hospital, for the mentally ill. The poet, in his thirties, is quartered with an ex-Harvard All-American and an ex-Porcellian, both out of the twenties—“These victorious figures of bravado ossified young.” Oddly, but with a comic logic in the circumstances, their lunacy contrasts sympathetically with “the crew haircuts and slightly too little nonsensical bachelor twinkle / of the Roman Catholic attendants.” This seems to be Lowell’s humorous way of registering his sense of nonacceptance in the Boston Irish community, where a right-footer from an old Protestant family would forever be beyond the pale—“There are no Mayflower screwballs in the Catholic Church.” Nevertheless, the three Ivy screwballs are presented in highly positive phallic imagery. The ex-fullback “hoarding the build of a boy in his twenties,” is “a ramrod / with the muscle of a seal.” The former Porcellian is as “roly-poly as a sperm whale.” Lowell himself is “Cock of the walk,” a fine figure at two hundred pounds in his “turtle necked French sailor’s jersey.” One must conclude that the New England breed, though regrettably hung up, is a vital one yet. But all that sexual energy, alas, is being childishly canceled. Existence at McLean’s is ruled by the death wish and the Jansenist Irish. Lowell’s sense of humor helps him to find a place for himself among the inmates: “thoroughbred mental cases, / twice my age and half my weight. / We are all old-timers.”

The result of Lowell’s stay at McLean’s is disclosed in “Home Again after Three Months Away.” He has been cured. But he still cannot write; now it is the poet who is impotent. The winter of his discontent threatens to stretch on and on. Yet this poem, presenting the nadir of Lowell’s self-destructive energy, also brings him

back to his little daughter, naked like those bigger babies, Stanley and Bobbie, at McLean’s. The difference is, of course, that she really is a child, not a stalled, infantile grown-up (like her father, whose thirteen weeks at the mental hospital were “child’s play”). The child exerts her mimic charm. With the irony of Wordsworth’s “pygmy” in the “Immortality Ode,” Freudian imagery involved in her play reminds us that some form of warfare with the parent is natural and universal. Like Young Bob, she loves to degrade her Daddy:

my child still dabs her cheeks
to start me shaving. When
we dress her in her sky-blue corduroy,
she changes to a boy,
and floats my shaving brush
and washcloth in the flush. . . .
Dearest, I cannot loiter here
in lather like a polar bear.

Lowell, if he is to mature as an adult in the sense of the Freudian myth, must get on with his work.

“Home Again after Three Months Away” is full of the contrast between death and life, duty and play. The season is late spring, and the pedigreed tulips are growing like weeds in “Our coffin’s length of soil.” The English sparrows have come through the winter, “nothing’s gone,” and Lowell’s daughter “holds her *levee* in the tub” where he may rub noses with her. Since hers is a “rising” (not a setting, as with the older generation) sun imagery is associated with her; why should he not rise too? To end the winter of his discontent, the poet, unlike Richard III, seems prepared to lay by the claims of his pedigree and his sarcastic pride as well. Like last year’s tulips (“now no one need / distinguish them from weed”) he is at least alive, though leveled to the ground:

I keep no rank nor station.
Cured, I am frazzled, stale and small.

This willingness to accept humiliation can account for the last four poems of “Life Studies,” which are given a separate part in the series of fifteen by the Roman numeral “II.” The four poems also have in common the fact that they do not deal with the Lowell family romance. They do, however, bear strongly upon the maturation story and they have definite comic qualities. “Memories of West Street and Lepke” takes us back to a forty-year-old Lowell. (The last poem had shown him at forty-one.) His daughter is nine months old: “Like the sun she rises in her flame-

flamingo infants’ wear.” The rising *movement* of the previous poem, therefore, is continued, although chronologically we are being taken into the past. The poet is now the teacher, depressively conscious of the ground he has lost in working society—even the garbage man is ahead of him as a family provider. He inspects his past. “Ought I to regret my seedtime?” he asks. The answer comes by way of reminiscence. He began his career in society by “telling off” President Roosevelt and denouncing the war (World War II), only to wind up, unmartyred, with the rest of the common criminals in a prison society whose aristocracy was headed by “Czar” Lepke of Murder, Incorporated. Czar Lepke had been lobotomized:

he drifted in a sheepish calm,
where no agonizing reappraisal
jarred his concentration on the electric chair—
hanging like an oasis in his air
of lost connections.

The moral is an obvious one. A person (and, of course, a country) should remain attached to connections without which there can be no moral responsibility and no selfhood. Along with this realization there is evidence that the Freudian cure is beginning to work. The poet has accepted himself—he can even laugh at himself and his own “manic” protest. Now he is prepared to accept his forebears and his past.

Of the remaining three poems, two are back-to-back accounts of a marital crisis, the third is the well-known “Skunk Hour.” I believe that these three, again, may well be taken together. It has proved to be quite unsatisfactory, in my opinion, to discuss the two marriage poems separately, and at least questionable not to relate them to the thoroughly explicated “Skunk Hour.” In “Man and Wife,” the poet, that is, the adult persona he wants people to accept as “the real Robert Lowell” (London and Boyers, p. 272), and his wife are engaging in that intimacy denied to Charlotte and Robert Lowell, Senior—a quarrel. “The rising sun in war paint dyes us red,” and the battleground, Mother’s bed (!), has also changed character completely; its “gilded bed-posts shine, / abandoned, almost Dionysian.” But the wife is in an Apollonian mood, shielding herself from her husband with a pillow and attacking him with a nonstop scolding:

your old-fashioned tirade—
loving, rapid, merciless—
breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.

That tirade, of necessity, must be represented by the next poem, called (in quotation marks) "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage." As is proper for a *tirade*, it is in rhymed couplets, not Alexandrines but their English equivalent, iambic five-foot lines. And the whole speech is in quotation marks. Are we to think of Chaucer's Wife of Bath? Perhaps not, but we ought certainly to think of something comic like her. This poem is often anthologized—one suspects, for its shock value. But it is not nearly so indiscreet as it may look. The epigraph from Schopenhauer undercuts it playfully. And the husband is accused (i.e., the poet is self-accused through his wife persona) of exaggerated sexual needs, matched by an elephantine capacity to perform. There are many men to whom making such a "confession" would not be a source of deep humiliation. (Another problem, perhaps, surfaces in the phrase "whiskey-blind"—after all, he passed out when they first met.) He needs her: three times he has been trapped "in the kingdom of the mad— / its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye—" and a fourth time is in immediate prospect. Still she remains loyal and supportive. Her "shrill verve" now scorches him as once, twelve years before, it scorched the South: "It's the injustice . . . he is so unjust." I suggest that we have in these two poems the neatest rhetorical trick of the century in American poetry, most of all because they are so effective a compliment to the man's wife:

Oh my *Petite*,
clearest of all God's creatures, still air and nerve

and partly because the poet makes himself out to be such a more-than-life-size sinner, and also such a lucky one. It's a piece of comic effrontery that shows our humble poet not so humble after all.

It seems to me that the Schopenhauer epigraph is important too: "It is the future generation that presses into being by means of these exuberant feelings and super-sensible soap bubbles of ours." It brings to our mind the little Lowell girl, and she connects and redeems the painful, destructive past of the poet, his impotence as a writer and his despairing last-ditch sexuality, and the natural resentment of his wife. The two marriage poems do make the wife out to be a real heroine. There is a very effective rhetorical sense at work here: Lowell presents a woman whose feeling for justice swallows up personal vanity, even personal pride, and yet never weakens her power to love,

but strengthens it rather. He intends us to admire her, not epically but comically, and we do.

"Skunk Hour," in connection with which Lowell protested that he was "over-understood" (Ostroff, p. 107), also presents what must be considered a comically exaggerated view of the poet's malign condition. "I myself am hell," he echoes no less a potentate than Satan in saying. If so, his fearsome presence doesn't scare that mother skunk from the pail of garbage she is sharing with her kittens. Like another of the mighty, King Lear, his "mind's not right," but he can still make jokes at the expense of his old butts, the New England millionaires. The gold-plater of one magnate (clothed by L. L. Bean as Young Bob had been by Rogers Peet) is about to become an honest work boat for a partnership of lobstermen. Even the gay decorator may have to give his decorative fishnet back to the fishermen and his cobbler's bench to the shoemaker—figuratively speaking, of course—and do some real work, like getting married. Everyone has seen that the meaning of this poem is, hang on to life and your piece of it and don't be scared away. It is comic that the call to survive should come to this poet from a skunk. The meaning of the anecdote is plain, and transcends the Freudian maturation myth and the family romance as well. It fits into the greater comedy of earthly existence, which we troubled humans share with the animals. "Skunk Hour" reveals to the poet that he now has something in common with the mother: the will to live, and to give life—to a little girl, to a poem.

I have suggested that Lowell's work in the *Life Studies* volume may helpfully be regarded as a response to the criticism he received in the years between *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) and 1957, when personal experiences including those of a poet among his fellow poets helped him to break out of a prolonged period of muteness. In the "Life Studies" series his adoption of a new, resolute stand toward life achieved a poetic presentation, as I have shown, largely by means of the Freudian myth of the psyche's progress from infantile Oedipal hostility and narcissism to the verge of adulthood and responsible paternity. Insofar as mine is merely an "interpretation" of "Life Studies," it may or may not be of much value. It is of greater critical importance, I think, to recognize that these fifteen poems are a literary entity, requiring the critic to treat them as such. If I can succeed in persuading the reader to entertain the

possibility that “Life Studies” is a comic work, that too has some importance. What I should like most of all to accomplish, however, is to invite attention to the nature of the changes Lowell made in his style, because an understanding of these changes helps us to appreciate the problems of contemporary poetry more fully. I believe, in fact,

that the redemptive movement in “Life Studies” is to be found in the evident renewal of the poet’s speech, as well as in the progress his persona makes toward adulthood in the Freudian sense.

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Notes

* The term “breakthrough” is more usually associated with Allen Ginsberg than with Robert Lowell, but I take it from the latter’s statement in 1961: “writing seems divorced from culture somehow. It’s become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life.” See *Robert Lowell: A Portrait of the Artist in His Time*, ed. Michael London and Robert Boyers (New York: D. Lewis, 1970), pp. 267–70, reprinting an interview in *Paris Review*.

¹ In Anthony Ostroff, ed., *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic* (Boston: Little, 1964), pp. 107, 108–10.

² An excellent selection of their criticism appears in the volume edited by London and Boyers cited above.

³ Writing in 1967, Hayden Carruth felt he detected “a faint odor of degenerate Freudian sentimentalism” (London and Boyers, p. 241). Jay Martin records that, in 1954, Lowell “made a start on a prose autobiography. He became interested in psychoanalysis, particularly in Freud. Now ‘Freud seemed the only religious teacher’ to him.” *Robert Lowell* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1970), p. 28. Martin doesn’t follow up this lead. I should like, however, to emphasize that my approach in this article is not meant to be Freudian, nor exclusively myth- or genre-oriented. I consider that “Life Studies” exhibits Freudian myths and a comic tone as major literary features, and my approach is partly interpretative and partly rhetorical in the broader context of a “layered” criticism.

⁴ This is a point made to me by Richard J. Fein, whom I wish to thank for other suggestions as well.

⁵ In *For the Union Dead* (New York: Farrar, 1964), “Middle Age,” “Fall, 1961,” and “Soft Wood” show the poet as an adult, noncomic persona.

⁶ *Life Studies* (New York: Farrar, 1959). This text has been reprinted several times without significant changes.

⁷ The technique of cancellation is rampant in the quoted passage. The word “belles” for music hall girls cancels “La Belle France.” “Goose necks” is hardly flattering. The “glorious signatures” were, of course, pseudonyms. “Beauty-moles” should be “marks.” Their coils of hair

should not be related to roosters, nor to tails. And the “khaki kilts” worn into battle by Highlander troops are still a shocking reminder of the colorless degradation of modern warfare.

⁸ Freud is admirable on the child and the comic. He makes imaginative advances upon Bergson, whom he quotes freely. In Freudian terms, the ultimate degradation of the grown-up is to be eaten by the child. In Bergsonian terms, Uncle Devereux is inflexible (he “snaps”—the expected word is *gingerbread* man). The “clothes-press” suggests repression, maintenance of a flat, official, uniform pattern. It contrasts with Young Bob’s carefree dirtying of his pants. Also, the image accords with Uncle Devereux’s physical condition. This image seems arbitrary at first, but it grows on one.

⁹ Lowell’s freer verse functions very well toward achieving an overall rhythm and continuity in these “Life Studies” poems. His former stress-charged, heavily rhymed lines went along with an impressive but claustrophobic imagery. They rotated, so to speak, with intense centripetal force around and around a dense emotional nucleus, hardly concerned with making forward progress. “Life Studies” entirely escapes these limitations, without sacrificing unduly what is good in Lowell’s characteristic style of incredibly implicated cross-reference.

¹⁰ Father’s “piker speculations” contrast with Grandfather’s prodigal losses—see *Lord Weary’s Castle*, where Grandfather’s generosity is his salvation (a point not yet made clear by the critics). Father’s spending “a king’s ransom” to reduce an ordinary Chevvie to snobbish plainness is an example of degenerate small-mindedness.

¹¹ The line from Mallarmé’s “Brise Marine,” which has been identified as Lowell’s allusion, is adapted from Baudelaire; Lowell alludes to both, possibly, but “Le Voyage” provides a richer ironical context.

¹² See Charles Mauron, *Psychocritique du genre comique* (Paris: José Corti, 1964), pp. 58–64, for a broad application to comedy of this central Freudian theme.